



Louth County Council

Viewpoint

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Eugene Mulholland
Head of Information Systems



Looking at a different horizon...

County Louth may be the smallest county in Ireland at 317 square miles, but it holds a strategic position on the east coast between Belfast and Dublin. With three main towns, links to major roads and ports that form the cornerstone of an efficient transport network between Ireland and mainland Europe, it is home to over 100,000 citizens. Louth County Council provides a diversity of services to these citizens.

Adoption of thin computing using Wyse Winterm thin clients has enabled Louth County Council to provide a greatly enhanced IT service to both its public users and its employees, at the same time simplifying the logistical management of its information systems, reducing the costs associated with IT support and enabling its information technology specialists to concentrate on more strategic projects.

Taking Action

Eugene Mulholland, Head of Information Systems, is responsible for meeting the IT needs of over 700 employees at multiple sites across the County as well as providing quality user experience of its information systems to the public. To deliver this service he has a team of just 5 technicians and 4 project management, database and software development staff. He explains: “We have an obligation to provide enhanced access to information services from our public locations. This includes five public libraries across the County, County Hall and several other sites. At the same time we are committed to providing improved access to information to our regionally and remotely located employees and councillors.”

Since 1993 Louth County Council had been using a central mainframe system from which it distributed applications to terminals and desktop PCs throughout its locations, including the libraries. “This infrastructure required a tremendous amount of on-site support at several geographically spread sites.” says Mulholland. “Given that we wanted to provide an enhanced service to the public at our libraries, including free Internet access, we needed to implement a solution that reduced this demand on our resources. We’d nursed our existing system through the Y2K period but needed to upgrade or replace key elements of it.”

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Mulholland’s options were centred on the continued use of PCs at these sites or the adoption of a Thin Client model. Recognising the certainty of higher support costs and risks associated with running several PCs at each library, and being already aware of the benefits of a centrally driven information system, he concluded thin clients were the way forward. “It’s very important to ensure continuity of service when addressing the information needs of our citizens.” he says. “We could see that by using thin clients in our libraries we would be able to more easily ensure consistency of service delivery and minimise the risks associated with Internet and physical security. Significantly, our technicians wouldn’t have to make frequent site visits across a wide area, since trained staff at each location could be supported remotely.”

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The team investigated the options in-house, with the use of thin clients and Citrix Metaframe being seen as one which could be tested on a relatively small scale and gradually introduced to other areas of the Council's operations if it proved successful. Satisfied of the way forward, the team looked for a partner it felt it could do business with. "We talked to several companies and chose to go with server based computing specialists, FutureRange" says Mulholland. "They have a much more co-operative approach which means we felt we were working with someone we knew well and who wasn't in the relationship simply to make a fast Buck."

"The Wyse Winterm devices are wholly reliable and flexible. They're there, they work and we just don't have to think about them"

After trialling some product options, FutureRange recommended the team deploy Wyse Winterm thin clients running Citrix Metaframe. "We wanted to ensure that we were using technology from companies that were going to be around for the long term. At that time there was no clear thin client market leader in Ireland but we could see that Wyse was going to be it" says Mulholland. "We also wanted a robust and rugged solution that would run effectively and consistently in the public environment and could be easily managed by on-site library staff at each location" he added.

Achieving Objectives

In 2002 the team deployed Wyse Winterm 1200LE and 1125SE devices at all five of the County's libraries and County Hall, initially to provide Internet access to the public users. The implementation took about six weeks. "We find these small, rugged devices very easy to manage," he says. "With a small footprint and no moving parts, they're not susceptible to the risks of damage, contamination by viruses and even theft that PC desktops usually are. This greatly reduces the downtime we suffered with PCs. Maintaining the profile of the devices is also greatly simplified, irrespective of who has been using them and for what."

An essential part of adopting the thin client strategy was to train staff at each library to undertake most of the day-to-day management of the devices and to publish applications to them as required. "Most support issues can now be dealt with locally by the library staff. This ownership is a key factor in our thin client success and has resulted in our technical support team only having to deal with about 20% of technical issues that are more complex." says Mulholland.

"As soon as they could see that the Winterm devices provided just as powerful and flexible an experience but without the technical issues...they were happy"

With the thin clients successfully serving the browsing needs of library users, the model was expanded with library staff being provided with Wyse devices to manage their key systems including 'Horizon', the libraries' SQL Server based transaction system that's used for everything from checking books in and out and managing book stocks and archives. "Getting employees to accept the model wasn't something we'd anticipated given the fact that the technology was already proving successful in the public environment." comments Mulholland. Initial inertia was based upon a perception that they were getting something less useful and powerful than their traditional desktop PCs, but this perception quickly evaporated once they used the devices. "As soon as they could see that the Winterm devices provided just as powerful and flexible an experience but without the technical issues they'd had with desktop PCs they were happy." he explains.

From there Mulholland introduced Wyse thin clients to the library training rooms that served various public needs, from typing tutoring and literacy development to career guidance. "Using thin clients in the training rooms means we can address the varied needs of individuals and groups alike. Our library systems officers can quickly set up the devices for one group and then simply reset them for the next." he says.

"Thin clients don't suffer from replacement cycles in the same way that PCs do"

Choosing the thin client model has created significant benefits for Louth County Council. Whilst it has facilitated the provision of valuable information services to the public at its libraries and main buildings, it has simplified the delivery of IT support to geographically spread locations without the costly need for regular site visits by a handful of technicians. Instead they've been able to concentrate on improving the provision of IT services to other users within the County such as their councillors and knowledge workers. It has also allowed Mulholland to make better use of his IT budget. "Thin clients don't suffer from replacement cycles in the same way that PCs do." he says. "We have Wyse devices that have been in constant use for the past three years. Whilst their cost is comparable to desktop PCs at the outset, the cost of maintaining and supporting them over the medium to long term is significantly less."

Mulholland fully expects to use Wyse thin clients elsewhere within his IT service delivery. He explains: "We'll never completely replace our PCs with thin clients, but wherever our employees have generic Microsoft Office type needs the model is ideally suited. In other areas we'll continue to use the PC model, for example as a back-up to the libraries' Horizon system. We're now starting to leverage the model to provide an improved IT service to our remote workers and councillors."

Asked if choosing the thin client and Wyse route had been a good decision, Mulholland answers: "If we hadn't, we would have had to expend considerably greater amounts of time and money on supporting, fixing and replacing PCs at all of these locations. Our employees, and the public they serve, would experience downtime periods a lot more frequently and updating the systems with new applications would prove extremely difficult logistically. The Wyse Winterm devices are wholly reliable and flexible. Their power lies in their simplicity and peace of mind. They're there, they work and we just don't have to think about them."

Conclusion

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